

## Koffler Centre of the Arts: Touching People's Lives



**Denyse Thomasos** is a well-regarded NY-based artist. Her work can be found in the many private collections as well as at the National Gallery of Canada. In her youth, she immigrated with her family from the Caribbean to Toronto and took her first art class at the Koffler Centre of the Arts. Denyse shares:

“I remember those early days at the Koffler Centre of the Arts being a magical time in my life. I had no idea at the time I was beginning a career in painting and drawing as an artist. I just knew that I loved gesture drawing and mixing paint. It was that simple. I had found this amazing thing that I could do with a charcoal pencil, line and movement in space and wanted to do it every chance I could. The Koffler Centre of the Arts seemed like a grand place to me. I must have been 16 years old. I remember going up to the Director's

office to ask for a scholarship for the classes. All very intimidating but when it was done I had a scholarship, a job as the studio monitor, and all the gesture drawing a girl could want. I also remember my family being blissfully happy that finally I had found something I loved. There were many report cards complaining about my daydreaming in school so when I found the Koffler and gesture there was definitely celebration in our household. My father drove me back and forth no matter what the weather conditions were. I remember being driven in a blizzard to the Koffler and my father complaining the entire way. Nothing would stop me. I loved going there and here I am many years later making those same line gestures with paint only now I make them on canvases 11 x 20 feet. The Koffler embraced me as a child and gave me a start in a life filled with passion and adventure and I will always be grateful to them.”



### **It's Never Too Late to Become an Artist**

**Mayer Kirshenblatt** often shared with his family vivid stories of growing up in Poland, which he left for Canada in 1934. One of Mayer's children is the celebrated scholar, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, an expert on museums, performance studies, and visual culture studies. When her father was in his seventies, his family began encouraging him to paint his memories but he resisted, insisting that he didn't know how to paint. Finally Mayer's wife signed him up for painting classes at the Koffler Centre of the Arts and told him that the course was non-refundable – and so an artist was born at 73! At age 91, he published a book with his daughter Barbara of his paintings, which has gone on to win many honours including the Helen Stan Vine Canadian Jewish Book Award from the Koffler Centre of the Arts. At age 92, a solo exhibition of his paintings opened at the Jewish Museum in New York City. The show has toured to California, Poland, Amsterdam, and Massachusetts and will be one of the first exhibitions at the new Museum of the History of Polish Jews when it opens in Warsaw next year. Mayer is truly

a local treasure, celebrated around the world. He participated in the Wrecking Ball festivities, bidding farewell to the Koffler Gallery, by donating a print from his collection to raise funds for arts education at the Koffler. Mayer passed away just a few months later in fall 2009 at the age of 93.

### **Liliana and her daughters**

Liliana and her two daughters recently emigrated from the FSU. Liliana told us that “if it were not for the Koffler Centre of the Arts, my family and I would not have met other recent émigré Jewish families and felt a part of community.” Each year, Liliana's daughters play to a packed house of parents and students at the Koffler's year-end recitals.



### **Building Bridges through Music**

In April 2010, internationally acclaimed music and arts educator **Yair Dalal** came to Toronto from Israel as the Koffler's artist-in-residence. After a sold out collaborative concert with the local Juno-nominated world music fusion band, Jaffa Road, Yair spoke to a group of young adults about his tireless efforts to connect people from diverse backgrounds through music. Yair also visited middle schools speaking about being an artist, about Middle Eastern music, and the importance of celebrating the specific cultural traditions of your heritage. He showed the students his oud while teaching Jewish-Iraqi songs and rhythms that he learned from Bedouins in Israel.

After speaking to a gathering of two hundred students at Zion Heights Junior High School of predominantly South East Asian and Asian heritage, one shy student approached Yair. With shoulder length hair and multiple piercings, his appearance gave the impression that he was a tough kid but when he opened his mouth to speak, a vulnerable, shy, and emotional side was revealed. He quietly shared: "You have really inspired me, now I want to be a musician."

Musician **Hartley Wynberg** is the teacher who hosted the Koffler and Yair Dalal at Zion Heights. He also participated in the masterclass that Yair taught to 30 of the city's top musicians and vocalists. Hartley reflected:

"Thank you Koffler Centre of the Arts, and all others who were involved in bringing Yair Dalal to Toronto. It was a rare treat to gain exposure to such an artist, personality, and peace ambassador. Dalal brings with him a vision and an approach that Toronto, in all its diversity, strives for, and his contribution was very welcomed by those, and there were many, who came to share and learn from him during his stay.

In troubadour fashion, Dalal brought with him and shared stories of the power of music; its ability to build bridges, and create dialog, music as a catalyst for bringing about positive change. I was witness to his participation with a middle-school group. Students connected to the music and the issues dear to him. Music, one got the sense, is his home and as he travels, he brings about dialog through the power of music. Being a musician is not just an endeavour, but a meaningful vocation, literally a calling. One student was so moved that he promised to take up music in his life.

The workshop for musicians was fun and educational. Dalal's way of teaching the fundamentals and the delicate intricacies of Arabic music was enlightening. There is much to learn as a Western educated musician about the music of the Middle East that are often difficult to reach given the lack of familiarity of its tonalities and musical systems. With the ease of a tenured educator, Dalal exposed some of the common stumbling blocks and offered access to the joy and meaning of the more difficult musical elements of Middle Eastern music with humour, stories and insight.

I look forward to more programs of this nature from the Koffler Centre of the Arts. As a musician, I may have biased high praise for the place and importance of the arts in its ability to forge community and identity, but it is so important in a place as diverse, and oft disparate, as Toronto."

Yair Dalal's residency demonstrated how the Koffler connects people through culture and helps guide people on a journey of self.

## **SEND US YOUR COMMENTS!**

Let us know how the Koffler Centre of the Arts has touched your life. E-mail us your thoughts and comments to: [info@kofflerarts.org](mailto:info@kofflerarts.org)